In 1984 the equivalent of 2.65 gallons of absolute alcohol was consumed per person over age 14 in the United States. This is about 50 gallons of beer, or 20 gallons of table wine, or more than 4 gallons of whiskey, gin, or vodka per person. Alcohol use in the United States is responsible for at least 98,000 deaths and approximately $130 billion in economic costs each year.

Heavier drinkers (those consuming more than 14 drinks per week) constitute 10 percent of the drinking population, but account for half of the alcohol consumed in the nations. At least 10 percent of all the deaths in the United States are related to alcohol misuse, including nearly half of all deaths in automobile crashes, homicides, and suicides. About one-fourth of American homes have been afflicted by an alcohol-related family problem. Alcohol is America's number-one drug problem.

Although alcohol consumption contributes to a public health problem of epidemic proportions, however, it gets short shrift in media and policy discussions aimed at addressing drug problems. There has been little scrutiny of the availability of alcohol and its contribution to drug morbidity and mortality. The denial of alcohol's enormous contribution to drug problems is evident not only in government and in newsrooms of major broadcast and newspaper organizations but also in scores of homes. It is not unusual for parents to sigh with relief that their adolescent children are only drinking and have yet to manifest any involvement with illicit drugs.

What is the cause of this widespread denial of the nature and extent of alcohol problems? Alcohol is a very big business. Alcohol industry revenue in the United States alone is over $65 billion a year. Obviously an industry of this size has an economic interest in increasing revenues and profits, and has substantial political clout to protect its interest.

And this multinational industry utilizes activities to create and sustain benign and appealing images of alcoholic beverages, which are internalized by citizens, their children, and key policymakers alike. The major tools of the alcoholic beverage industry to enhance sales and image are advertising and marketing. The result of this multi-million dollar annual drug promotion effort is to limit public recognition of alcohol as a drug and as a disease promoter.

The alcoholic beverage industry spends approximately two billion dollars each year on advertising and promotions in the United States. Over $800 million was spent on television advertising alone. In 1988 breweries in the United States paid for about 10 percent of all sponsorships of athletic, music, cultural, and other special events. They fund activities such as sports events, rock concerts, and college 'spring break' promotions activities that generally attract large audiences of under-age drinkers.

Alcohol advertising, especially in the broadcast media, represents the single greatest source of alcohol education for consumers. Beer and wine ads depict alcohol products as the ultimate reward for a football game well played or a job well done; they associate the consumption of beer and wine with financial success and romance; and in some cases, they explicitly encourage heavy drinking. Creativity, big money, and more than a little finesse formulate a message that alcohol is a necessary ingredient to enjoy a sports event or a
night on the town.

Jean Kilbourne, Ed.D., international lecturer on alcohol advertising, argues that advertising is essentially myth-making. Rather than offering concrete information about a product, advertising establishes an image for the product. According to Kilbourne, "Alcohol advertising does create a climate in which dangerous attitudes toward alcohol are presented as normal, appropriate, and innocuous. Most important, alcohol advertising spuriously links alcohol with precisely those attributes and qualities happiness, wealth, prestige, sophistication, success, maturity, athletic ability, virility, creativity, sexual satisfaction that the misuse of alcohol usually diminishes and destroys."

Despite serious public concern over the death and injury associated with drinking and driving over the last decade, it is not unusual for ads to associate drinking with driving and with other high-risk activities. Beer and wine coolers are ubiquitous components of a good time at the beach, on the white-water rafting trip, or on the ski slope. In a 1987 study by media communication specialists, the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety concluded that beer commercials link drinking and driving through references to beer with images of moving cars and references to the pleasures of beer with the pleasures of driving.

Moreover, the report found that beer ads glorify risk-taking and challenge-seeking behavior and disregard of one's own actions. The study recommends immediate action to prohibit this genre of lifestyle ads for beer, either through a complete ad ban, limiting ad content to product identification, or at the very least, prohibition of the use of motor vehicles in ads and references to driving and speed.

This report represents a serious indictment of the beer industry and the dangerous socialization of the nation's through advertising an educational process that undoubtedly contributes to the annual 10,000 deaths of American young people 16-24 years old through alcohol-related drownings, suicides, violent injuries, homicides, and injuries from fire. These findings also support an earlier study which found that adolescents and young adults more heavily exposed to alcohol ads on TV and in magazines are more likely to perceive drinking as attractive, acceptable, and rewarding than are those who have been less exposed.

The onset of alcohol use in the United States today occurs at about 12 years of age. Large surveys of school children report that as many as one-third of ten-year-olds report peer pressure to drink alcohol. Only half of this same group knew that beer, wine, or liquor is a drug, compared to 87 percent who knew that marijuana is a drug.

Unfortunately, alcohol advertising remains a more significant alcohol educator than parents or the school system. Alcohol is the only drug for which knowledge about it as a drug decreases, rather than increases with age. Even fewer 14-year-olds identified beer, wine, or liquor as a drug than did their 10-year-old counterparts, and the percentage of children who thought daily use of alcohol was harmful decreased 29 percent from the younger group.

Alcohol advertising has but one purpose to promote the sale of the product. Each week television reaches 90 percent of teenagers and 92 percent of children in the United States. As the population of the United States ages and alcohol consumption declines, the alcoholic beverage industry has a greater economic stake in recruiting young, heavy drinkers. Despite recent increases in federal support for drug education in the public school system and increasing public recognition of the seriousness of alcohol problems among youth, alcohol ads continue to misrepresent drinking as normal, glamorous, and consequence-free.

The heaviest drinking group, young white males, reduce consumption as they age and are not replaced as population growth stabilizes. Thus, alcohol manufacturers have targeted women and ethnic and racial minorities to maintain their profit margins.

The alcoholic beverage industry, after excluding women from ad campaigns until the mid 1950s, now targets women with ads that associate drinking with lifestyles characterized by independence, good health, and professional accomplishment. Alcohol manufacturers copy the tobacco industry in associating self-actualization for women with an increase in risk-taking behavior.
Alcohol ads woo health-conscious consumers, especially women, by positioning alcohol as a health food. Beer and wine cooler television commercials feature women in gymnastics or aerobic garb topping off a rigorous routine with "a cold one." Unfortunately, a number of publishers of women's magazines have been quick to welcome and to accommodate the industry's sudden and vigorous interest in American women as consumers, presumably to maintain or increase advertising revenues for their publications.

Black Americans have also become an important market for the alcoholic beverage industry and a major target for pro-drinking marketing messages. According to a recent report on the state of minority health in America, blacks "suffer disproportionately from the health consequences of alcohol. . . . [and] appear to be at a disproportionately high risk for certain alcohol-related problems." In a 1985 survey by the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) and the Minnesota Institute of Black Chemical Abuse, health professionals who work with black alcoholics identified poverty as the most important factor influencing drinking. Regrettably, federal and state governments have made very few expenditures to address alcohol problems in the black community. According to the CSPI, "the lion's share of what is being said and done about alcohol in the black community consists of a steady diet of alluring commercial marketing campaigns designed to promote alcohol consumption among blacks."

Many television ads for alcoholic beverages utilize black spokespersons, and the association of alcohol consumption with machismo and economic opportunity are frequent themes. As with women, ads targeting African-Americans often associate alcohol with access to power. It is cruelly ironic that an addictive and potentially enslaving drug should be offered as a replacement for the success and economic stability that so frequently elude African-Americans as a result of poverty and circumscribed opportunity.

In addition to these themes, the alcoholic beverage industry uses ads to promote alcohol products consumed predominantly in the black community. High alcohol content male liquors are marketed almost exclusively to Blacks and Latinos. These products generally contain as much as 20 percent more alcohol than regular beers.

Billboard advertising for alcoholic beverages is ubiquitous in many low-income minority neighborhoods. In 1985, nine of ten leading billboard advertisers were tobacco or alcoholic beverage companies.

The alcoholic beverage industry claims that advertising is aimed at encouraging people who already drink to switch brands and to support moderate drinking. Given the demographics of alcohol consumption, however, industry support for low-level consumption is unlikely. Robert Hammond, director of the Alcohol Research Information Service estimates that if all 105 million American drinkers of legal age consumed the official "moderate amount of alcohol the equivalent of about two drinks per day the industry would suffer "a whopping 40-percent decrease in the sale of beer, wine, and distilled spirits, based on 1981 sales figures." Heavy drinkers are clearly the alcoholic beverage industry's best customers. Too often, these prime targets for alcohol promotion are alcoholics and adolescents who are at substantial risk for alcohol-related trauma as well as addiction.

The domination of mass communications by alcohol advertising serves an additional insidious role. The dependence of media outlets, both broadcast and print, on revenues derived from alcohol ads serves as a censor on information about alcohol's health and safety risks and about the industry's efforts to recruit new and heavier users. Media coverage of drug problems routinely eliminate discussion of alcohol.

In her testimony to the United States Senate on alcohol advertising, Dr. Kilbourne documented numerous instances in which alcohol advertising served to eliminate from magazines and news programs appropriate discussion of alcohol's contribution to morbidity and mortality. According to Kilbourne, alcohol advertising "drastically inhibits honest public discussion of the problem in the media and creates a climate in which alcohol is seen as entirely benign."

How can we address the large role played by alcohol advertising in nurturing alcohol problems, glorifying drug use, and contributing to widespread denial about the nature and breadth of alcohol problems in individuals, families, congregations, and in the society at large? In the policy arena, alcohol advertising presents us with our greatest
It is not difficult to persuade ordinary citizens that alcohol advertising is counterproductive to efforts to reduce alcohol and other drug problems. To date, however, efforts to restrict alcohol advertising have been largely unsuccessful.

In the United States Congress, where thousands of bills are introduced every session, advocates have been unable to garner as many as a dozen cosponsors of legislation to require equal time for health and safety messages about alcohol. The same legislators who seriously propose the invasion of third-world countries to address drug trafficking are loathe even to consider restrictions on advertising beer and wine. The combined forces of the alcoholic beverage industry, the advertisers, and the major media companies have a vested interest in the maintenance of a laissez-faire policy in regard to alcohol advertising. All have considerable political influence.

In 1984-85, the CSPI led a spirited campaign to address alcohol advertising called Project SMART Stop Marketing Alcohol on Radio and Television. A petition drive calling for equal time for health messages about alcohol when alcohol ads are aired or a ban on broadcast advertising of alcoholic beverages attracted well over one million signatures. Despite enormous media attention and two Congressional hearings, no legislative action was taken, nor were any legislative proposals seriously considered.

Nevertheless, serious interest in restrictive measures continues to grow. The United States is in year three of an officially declared “war on drugs” and denial of alcohol's role in drug problems is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain. In 1988 Congress enacted a law mandating warning labels on all alcoholic beverage containers as a component of comprehensive anti-drug legislation. Last year the White House Conference for a Drug-free America adopted a resolution calling for restrictions on alcohol advertising directed at youth, despite serious attempts to exclude alcohol completely as a subject of discussion for conferees. In December 1988, C. Everett Koop, the widely respected U.S. Surgeon General, chaired a workshop on drunk driving which recommended restrictions on alcohol advertising and marketing, over the protests of the broadcasters and the advertisers. Preliminary recommendations from the Surgeon General's workshop related to advertising include:

- matching the level of alcohol advertising exposure with equivalent exposure for effective pro-health and safety messages;
- elimination of alcohol advertising from college campuses;
- elimination of alcohol advertising and promotion and sponsorship of public events where the majority of the audience is under the legal drinking age;
- elimination of advertising that portrays activities which are dangerous when combined with alcohol use;
- elimination of the use of celebrities who have a strong appeal to youth in alcohol advertising and promotion;
- elimination of tax deductions for alcohol advertising and promotion other than price and product advertising;
- requirement of warning labels in alcohol advertising.

These recommendations represent some of the most promising policy measures to address alcohol advertising.

Citizen activists have not been alone in pressing for restrictive legislation regarding the advertising of alcoholic beverages. A quick review of the literature reveals serious concern about the influence of advertising on alcohol and other drug problems in numerous countries including France, Australia, Austria, Nigeria, Canada, and Switzerland. Finland, Sweden, and the Soviet Union have a prohibition on alcohol advertising.

A 1985 public opinion poll in France found that 40 percent of respondents viewed alcohol advertising as excessive and having serious impact on youth and the unemployed. Fifty-eight percent of persons surveyed thought that some limits should be placed on advertising and 21 percent thought alcohol ads should be banned. In Australia, proposals to address alcohol advertising have included a ban on "lifestyle" alcohol advertising in all media; a modification of broadcast standards to include a prohibition of alcohol advertising before 9:30 p.m.; and the establishment of a system of co-regulation in which the government assumes a watchdog role with active
participating by non-industry groups.22

Efforts to restrict alcohol advertising pit public health concerns against the economic interests of powerful institutions in a very direct way. Organizing and constituency-building are critical if we are to affect seriously the way the alcoholic beverage industry does business in nations around the globe. The very pervasiveness of alcohol problems lends itself to the development of powerful coalitions. Advocates from alcoholism organizations, public health, medicine, youth groups, the religious community, public safety activists, women's and ethnic minority organizations all have a stake in reducing the level of alcohol problems.

Alcoholism and other alcohol-related problems are complex and there is no single or easy solution. Restricting or eliminating alcohol advertising will not end alcohol problems. But such action will provide a greater balance in the kind of information the public receives about alcohol. Efforts to restrict or eliminate alcohol advertising will empower individuals to make informed choices about their use of alcoholic beverages without the undue influence of the glitz and misinformation so characteristic of alcohol ads today.

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References
